

[A Scotch Quarryman's Widow]

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A SCOTCH QUARRYMAN'S WIDOW

From Quarry Hill the far horizon is a series of soft roundings, Green Mountain [curves?] rimming a blue sky. Closer, slanting fields patched with brown squares of newly ploughed earth. Nearer, in the yards of the Hill dwellers, a blossoming apple or lilac, a straggling shrub or two striving to thrust its flowering color beyond the film of granite dust. A handful of children play unconcernedly on this porch and that, darting between heavily laden clothesline. All their lives they have heard the wearying quarry sounds - the monotonous rat-tat-tat of [pnosmatic?] drills, the exhausted, whining breath from an engine house. How they are conscious of them only when they cease.

The yellow house beside the struggling lilacs had seen better days. Two tiers of kitchen porches sag beneath the weight of ice-boxes and chairs. The woman spoke from behind the screen door of the lower porch. Her hair was pulled back to a grey, drab knob. She fumbled with her apron, and wiped her red hands dry. "Sure, come in." After the noise of the quarries her voice, any voice, - was pleasant. A good natured smile wrinkled the corners of her dark eyes and wide, firm mouth. "Alex said you would be coming today. Come in. There's little I can tell you, but you're welcome to what little I know, and more that I feel—" C. [3 Vt?] 2

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This used to be a rooming and boarding house for quarrymen. My mother-in-law ran it when she came from Scotland. She did well. Her husband worked in the quarries. They worked full time those days, and what with the board-and-room money and being thrifty, and having only one child (that was my husband Johnny) they were able to buy the house for their own. No, I was born in Barre. Me and Johnny, we came here to live after his folks died. There aren't so many single quarry workers as there were years back so we did away with most of the roomers. We've made it into two apartments. The family upstairs have no roomers at all. I've taken in two since Johnny died, that was three years ago. Lots of the single fellows have cars now, they'd rather ride back and forth to work, and live in Barre where there's more going on.

They haven't been very busy in the quarries this spring. My roomer Alex is working only three days a week now. And pretty soon there'll be a two week, 'rest. There always is after Memorial Day.

No, my husband didn't die of stonecutters' T. B. although I've seen it take plenty around here. It was an accident he had, right here in our yard. It was the fall of the year and the kitchen steps were slippery with the first snow. He slipped and cut his arm on the axe he'd been chopping kindling with. He got infection, and on top of that he had to have an operation. It was too much for him. It just 3 shows, as Alex says, that accidents will happen where you least expect them. All the times he climbed up and down the quarries, with me worrying and begging him to be careful, he never got any more than a crushed finger in the quarries. And then to have it happen on his own doorstep, it seemed more than I could bear.... Of course, there are accidents in those holes, there's bound to be. One fellow was killed last year. Have you ever watched a good quarryman climb up and down those granite walls? It's worth your time. I used to hold my breath watching them; I still do. Old men, past 65, that you might see doddering down a street and never expect to be able to do a good day's work. I know one, an old Frenchman, who's been here, he says, since 1892. He swings a couple of 5-ft. iron bars across a shoulder, and steps down those

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dangerous walls without so much as laying a finger to the granite for support. Sometimes his hat, face and clothes are so grey with dust that he looks like a small, loosened piece of the stone wall, rolling to the bottom.

Yes, most of the quarrymen are Union men. Both of my roomers are. It pays them to belong. They've got a quarry life ahead of them and they might as well enjoy the Union benefits. Some of the older ones don't seem to care any more, they slip up on their dues.

I have two sons. Good boys they are, too. They didn't want to work here after they left school, nor did I want them to. Their father always said it was like burying yourself in a stone grave and hardly knowing there was a world and [sun?] around you, and what pay do you get? Good enough, by the day, 4 but there's always a month or two you lose in the winter when the snow's bad, and the ice. Then there are seasons when the business is slow, like now. It doesn't pay, there's no future for a young fellow. I was glad as could be when the boys got clerking jobs in Barre.

Yes, they're both married. John, the oldest, married an Irish girl, a neighbor here, her father'd had a small quarry 'way up back there. It wasn't good granite, he didn't do well so he stopped working it. The other boy married a Scotch girl.

The oldest boy doesn't make much money. He was thinking of coming back here and taking the upstairs apartment, it would cost him less than living in Barre. But much as I would like to have him here with me, I advised him against it. It's no place to bring up lively children. I had my hands full when John and Pete were little ones and always that eager to explore those hills of waste granite and the quarries. And high up as we are here with always a little breeze, I can't help feeling that the air is full of dust. Sometimes when the wind is strong you'll see whole clouds of grey up there, almost as if a storm was coming up. Now Pete, he'd like me to live with him in Barre, but I'm still capable of taking care of myself, besides I figure an in-law is always in the way.

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No, I don't mind the quarry noises. I've been here so long. If I awake at night, I sort of miss them. And days when they don't work I miss them. Looking at those piles 5 of waste granite isn't a pretty sight, but I can look out from my window at night and see the lights of Barre. It's a nice picture. And day times I can see for miles around, I can see hills that are green, and fields that in the spring are just brown, upturned earth, I can watch them through the summer getting green with vegetables and crops. It seems good to look at green hills that hold the shape God gave them and aren't spoiled with quarry holes and those grey waste piles.